



HEADLINES

Dialogue on Race Relations

Will the president's initiative go beyond conversation?

When President Bill Clinton launched his initiative for a year-long dialogue on race relations last June, he stood before the graduating class of the University of California at San Diego and wondered aloud whether America could overcome discrimination and prejudice and accept the power of diversity. "Can we fulfill the promise of America by embracing all our citizens of all races?" he asked. "Can we become one America in the 21st century?"

Seven months later, as the issue plays out, its underlying complexities contin-

York, Pollard is now convinced of the initiative's necessity. "As I become more involved, I see the need for this conversation," he explains. "There is still a lack of understanding among people, and that includes differing opinions as to what the nature of the problem is."

In fact, identifying the "problem" seems to be at the core of discussion. Jack Horner '71, legislative director for Congressman J.C. Watts of Oklahoma, thinks a dialogue based on race may be misdirected. "It seems the president isn't up-to-date with current thinking," Horner says. The College of Arts and Sciences graduate points out that Watts, an African American Republican, believes the roots of inequality lie in the nation's school system. "Congressman Watts wants real educational reform, like vouchers for school choice, to give all kids equal opportunity," Horner says. "This vague notion of a conversation doesn't deal with the need for policy change."

For Pollard, education includes reminding adults that inequality exists in perception as well as opportunity. "We must continue to educate everyone that black people are just like white people—as good, as smart, et cetera," he says. "When I look at black and white relations, I see a tendency by some to look at people of African descent as something less than white."

While Pollard admits that a national dialogue may fail to change many people's attitudes, he believes it will produce results. "Of course, people can always mask their attitudes," he says. "But we can certainly affect behavior."

Horner agrees that race relations warrant discussion, but remains skeptical about the president's motives. "There has been an ongoing national dialogue—a healthy one," he asserts. "That's the nature of a democracy. Right now we're at a time of peace and prosperity, and the president seems to be reaching for a challenge that will become the legacy of his second term."

The politics surrounding the initiative are clear to William Coplin, professor of public affairs at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs. "I think it's a political football," he says. "Shifting the nation's attention to a discussion of race is a subterfuge of the real problem,



MIKE PRINZO

ue to surface. From many voices arise many opinions on questions as fundamental as whether a dialogue can be fruitful, and how to define "racism."

William Pollard, dean of the School of Social Work, had his own conflicting opinions when he learned of the plan for a conversation on race. "My initial feelings were a bit mixed," he says. "For me, a dialogue wasn't the burning issue." Then he became part of the initiative. As co-chair of the dialogue circle for the InterReligious Council of Central New

which is inequality of access to the benefits of society. That's an issue of class, and race is part of that. But it's race that sells newspapers and fills up the airwaves."

The media, of course, have covered various stages of the dialogue as they develop, including criticism. One of the initiative's earliest critics emerged from Clinton's own advisory board on race relations. During the initiative's planning stages, the board's sole Asian American, Angela Oh, expressed concern that the dialogue would fail to move beyond black-white issues. Bruce R. Hare, professor of African American studies and sociology, voices a similar concern. "We need a de-racialization of the discussion," he says. "I fear this will end up being the same old conversation played over again. We've been calling for racial harmony for a long time, and it's not working."

Hare believes people must give up racial categories, and any national dialogue must question the schema through which people deal with each other. "The whole idea of race is socially constructed and arbitrary," he says. "It changes across countries. We have continental and cultural—not racial—identities. Racism is really the belief in the existence of races."

An undertaking as ambiguous as a national dialogue naturally draws scrutiny. While some observers welcome the initiative as long overdue, others foresee no benefits coming from it. Coplin rejects the idea that a presidential commission can steer the nation toward defining and dealing with the issue. "It's unproductive to try to stimulate discussion among intellectuals," he says. "There can never be a truly open and honest dialogue, because it presumes racial conflict. What we need is increased opportunity for everyone, because right now an unlevel playing field is inherent in our society. A dialogue is an unacceptable way to address that problem."

Hare acknowledges that a dialogue alone will solve nothing, but thinks it has potential as a starting point for action. The outcome, he says, depends upon the framework of discussion. "A conversation that is wrongly framed, of course, can be harmful," Hare contends. "One that comes from the paternalistic view that we are a nation of whites that must deal

with blacks is doomed from the start."

No one can predict what results the dialogue will produce in a year, and opinions are split on whether it is headed in the right direction. For Hare, the idea of a national conversation reminds him of another dialogue on race he once heard. "My 3 1/2-year-old and 5-year-

old sons were playing with their Crayolas, and the younger one said to his brother, 'Why do they call pink people white?' and 'Why do they call brown people black?' They were pre-racialized," Hare says. "Ultimately, the president needs to say, 'We are but one human race.'"

—AMY NORTON

TAKING ACTION

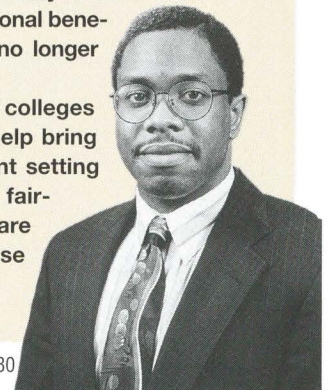
➤ **Raymond C. Pierce '80**, deputy assistant secretary for the Office for Civil Rights at the U.S. Department of Education, discussed affirmative action in higher education during a lecture at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs in October. Appointed by President Clinton in 1993, Pierce oversees all policy development and operations within the civil rights office. His presentation was part of the Maxwell lecture series "Critical Choices for the United States." Here is an excerpt from Pierce's speech:

"Higher education has a special role in ensuring that appropriate and legally formulated affirmative action programs remain a part of the educational mission. Many students enter college having had virtually no contact with individuals from other racial and ethnic backgrounds. In commenting on this situation, the late Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall stated the following: 'Unless our children begin to learn together, there is little hope that our people will ever learn to live together.'"

"The demographics surrounding the workforce also would urge schools to encourage all students to learn how to respect and value one another for their differences. Those coming into the workforce will be much different from those who people it today. Most new entrants will be non-white, women, and immigrants. Minorities and women will make up 69 percent of entrants to the workforce between 1995 and the year 2005.

"For our part, the Office for Civil Rights will continue to support efforts by colleges and universities to remedy discrimination and to achieve the benefits of diversity for all students through lawful programs. And let me be clear. Lawful affirmative action programs do not rely on quotas or race-based preferences for unqualified candidates; do rely on open competition among all individual applicants; are narrowly tailored to consider race or national origin only to the extent necessary to achieve important educational benefits; and are reviewed frequently and, when no longer needed, are ended.

"This leads us to what can be expected of colleges and universities. We are looking to you to help bring us together. Higher education is an excellent setting for acquiring and developing the sensitivity, fairness, and appreciation of differences that are main ingredients in building a renewed sense of community."



Raymond C. Pierce '80